

## METLAKATLA, ALASKA: SOME HISTORY

The town of [Metlakatla](#), Alaska, is located on Annette Island at the far south end of the southeast Alaska island chain, just about 20 miles north of the borders of the United States and Canada. This series of islands and waterways is known as the Inland Passage and is a main thoroughfare for the cruise ships traveling north to visit Alaska.

Annette Island is located south and west of [Ketchikan](#), Alaska's fifth-largest city. Metlakatla is located on the west side of the island.

Metlakatla is a Tsimshian Indian community of about 1,500 people. The town of Metlakatla is the only permanently inhabited area of the 86,741-acre island. The island is basically a thickly forested mountain top. Most of the forest terrain is impassable due to the thickness of growth, steepness of terrain and a deep covering of spongy forest compost known as *muskeg*. The island has a few primitive roads and trails crossing the interior; the roads are left from the logging effort that went on for several years. During that time, a sawmill operated at Metlakatla. Currently, the main logging road across the interior serves the military as work progresses on the road project. The military has a base camp established on the east side of the island and commutes across the island to the road project site located along the northwest edge of the island.

Metlakatla was founded in 1887 by Reverend William Duncan and Tsimshian Indian Christians, who migrated from "Old Metlakatla," British Columbia, Canada. The migration to Annette Island was a result of conflicts with the Provincial federation governments over land claims and tribal sovereignty.

Duncan was a lay minister with the Church of England and a man of great principles. He disagreed with the church authorities in Old Metlakatla over teaching certain rituals and ceremonies to the Tsimshian Indians. This disagreement led to the church seizing Tsimshian lands, and almost led to armed conflict.

Duncan journeyed to Boston and then on to Washington D.C. where he met with U.S. President Grover Cleveland, who was sympathetic to the plight of the Tsimshian Indians. Cleveland recognized the right of the Indians to occupy land within their native home region regardless of the division of this area by Canada and the United States, which had acquired part of the Tsimshian's historical home region during the Alaska purchase. Cleveland told Duncan to choose an island in southeast Alaska for the new home for the Tsimshian Indian community.

A Tsimshian native search committee selected Annette Island because of its sheltered bay, gently sloped beaches, and waterfalls. On August 7, 1887, Duncan and 823 Tsimshian natives proclaimed the birth of "New Metlakatla" on Annette Island. August 7th has been celebrated every year since 1887 as Founders Day by the community on Annette Island.

The building of new Metlakatla was rapid, with Duncan drawing up the plan for roads, public buildings, and schools, as well as his own home. On April 28, 1889, the first public building in the new community was dedicated, housing the day school and the church.

In 1891 the U.S congress formally recognized the community by creating the Annette Island Reserve, a federal Indian Reservation. This gave the Metlakatla Indians the exclusive use of the island. In 1916, a presidential proclamation extended the reservation to include the surrounding waters 3,000 feet out from the island.

Duncan remained in charge of the mission at New Metlakatla until his death August 30, 1918. He is buried on the site of his original church in New Metlakatla. The original church burned down in 1949 but was rebuilt on the same site and is known as the William Duncan Memorial church.

When congress was considering the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971, the Metlakatla Indian Reservation was given the opportunity to end its reservation status and participate in the settlement act with other Alaskan natives. The settlement act would have provided payments of land and money to the natives, but the Metlakatla community decided to retain its reservation status. Today, it remains the only native reservation in the state of Alaska.

Most of the island is mountainous, rising up to 3,500 feet above sea level. The town of Metlakatla is located on a 24-square mile low-lying peninsula on the shore of Port Chester. During World War II, a military airfield occupied an area south of town and was used by both Canada and the United States. The U.S. military started using Annette Island for weather observations in 1941. The air field was later used by the U.S. Coast Guard until they moved across the channel and located in Ketchikan. The airfield was also the original regional airport for Ketchikan and surrounding communities until a modern airport was built on Gravina Island closer to Ketchikan.

In 1947, the U.S. Weather Bureau – which became the National Weather Service in 1970 – took over responsibility for the airfield. The NWS continues to maintain a presence on the island.

The reservation on Annette Island is locally governed by a 12-member council, with a mayor elected by the general voting membership of the community. The council oversees the federal and state funding that comes to the community, as well as administering health, safety, and welfare responsibilities. The community operates its own utility system through hydroelectric and diesel generation plants. A cold storage facility and a fish hatchery in Metlakatla are community property.

The original 823 Indians that came to Annette Island had converted to Christians and were required by William Duncan to give up their Indian titles and rituals before becoming a member of the community. Today, the Indian culture is returning due to a continued interest in native crafts, dance, and language.

Although Annette island is located in an area set aside as the Tongass National Forest by the U.S. government, the island is not apart of the national forest. The natural resources of the island are under the total control of the Metlakatla reservation council.

The Metlakatla Indian Community (MIC), which had been trying to get the Walden Point Road built for nearly 60 years, was successful in getting the military involved through the Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) program.

**Source: *History of the Metlakatla Indian Community – 2004*, prepared by Ellen Ryan, Secretary, under the supervision of Ethel Leask and Mayor Victor C. Wellington, Sr.**